

ELEMENTARY EDUCATION IN JAPAN

BY

Prof. D. K. GARDE M. A.

[*Reprinted from the City College Magazine, January 1940*]

Synopsis:

*Its importance and Universality—
—High percentage of Literacy—Kinder-
garten Classes—Objects of Elementary
Education—Terms, Admission, Detention—
Physical training and Medical inspec-
tion—Time table and detailed Syllabus—
What is 'Spiritual Culture?'—Class
Management—Appointments, Salaries
Training etc. of Teachers—Position of Head
Master—Administration, Finance and
Inspection—Text-books—Building and
Equipment—Seating arrangement of boys
and girls—New Education Movements—
Higher Elementary Schools—"Examina-
tion Hell" in Japan—General Equipment
of an Elementary School "Graduate".*

Elementary Education in Japan

(By : Prof. D. K. Garde M. A.)

"Ye our subjects, be filial to your parents, affectionate to your brothers and sisters ; as husbands and wives be harmonious, as friends true, bear yourselves in modesty and moderation ; extend your benevolence to all ; pursue learning and cultivate arts, and thereby develop intellectual faculties and perfect moral power ; furthermore, advance public good and promote common interests ; always respect the constitution and observe the law ; should emergency arise, offer yourselves courageously to the State and thus guard and maintain the prosperity of our Imperial throne coeval with Heaven and Earth. So shall ye not only be Our good and faithful subjects, but render illustrious the best traditions of your forefathers." (*Imperial Rescript on Education*).

Even a casual visitor to Japan cannot fail to be impressed by one thing. Wherever he goes to the countryside, the most impressive, the best-equipped and often the largest building he comes across is the Elementary School building. This is a clear indication at once of the wide spread of education and of the importance which it occupies in Japanese national life. In fact some of the local bodies are actually spending as much as half of their budget to maintain and support elementary schools in their areas. The modern system of education in Japan dates from 1872, the fifth year of the Meiji Era, when elementary education was made compulsory. The new system was established mainly after that of the French, the entire country being mapped out into several districts, each having the requisite number of schools, under the general supervision of the Central Government.

According to the Law of 1872 every child, male and female, irrespective of its social status, was obliged to attend school for four years, from the age of six to ten. This period was later lengthened to six years, and it is by no means rare that two more years are added to this course at present.

High Percentage of Literacy

The proportion of children in schools to the total number of those of school-going age is 99.48 per cent, which gives us a fairly good idea about the universality of education in Japan. There are

about 12,000,000 pupils at elementary Schools which number 26,000 (approximately). The extent of the spread of newspapers bears testimony to the same. The circulation of more than 1,100 newspapers is about 19,000,000. There are at least five daily papers each of which claims to have a circulation of over 1,000,000. In a crowded railway compartment it is not unusual to find almost every passenger busy reading some paper.

The following exhortation of Emperor Meiji must have served as an impetus to the universal drive against illiteracy and ignorance: 'Henceforth shall education be so diffused that there shall be no ignorant family in the land, and no family with an ignorant member' This desire has almost literally been fulfilled, as the above figures will show.

Before joining an elementary school, children in many cases attend kindergarten classes. They are attached to some of the larger schools, while some are separate and are run by private concerns. In the kindergarten classes the teachers are mostly women, the duration is from three to four hours, each period covering about 30 minutes, and the subjects are mostly playing, singing and handwork. As a rule no books are used, but only pictures are shown. In privately managed kindergarten classes fees are naturally higher. There are about 2,000 Kinder-Gartens, attended by about 150,000 pupils.

Object of Elementary Education

Coming to the elementary schools, one finds that they are designed to give children the rudiments of moral education, specially adapted to make them good members of the community, together with such general knowledge and skill as are necessary for the practical duties of life, while due attention is paid to their physical development. This, in brief, is the object of the elementary education.

The session usually begins in April when new admissions are made. Admission may be refused on grounds of poor health in which case pupils are advised to wait till they improve and come upto the required standard. The same ground may serve to occasion, and justify, detention of students, at any of the succeeding stages.

According to a recent law the *medical examination* of pupils is to be held *five times a year* and health-chart of each student (showing his progress from time to time) is kept in class rooms for reference and guidance. Intellectual tests are also held but *much more stress is*

laid on physical fitness. In some schools there is a provision for treating weak children with ultra-violet rays.

Time Table

The School generally begins at 8 a.m. when all boys and girls assemble before the Imperial Shrine. A portrait of the emperor is hung in the Head Master's room but it is usually veiled and is exposed to the public view on rare occasions such as national holidays. After the prayer, which lasts for about fifteen minutes, regular work begins. After every period of 45 minutes there is a recess of 15 minutes during which boys and girls go out of classrooms and have callisthenics (free movements of limbs).

At noon they have a long recess of 45 minutes for lunch. In villages the pupils bring their own lunch baskets while in cities more elaborate arrangements on spot are available.

The lower three classes have no work on Saturdays in the afternoon, but the three senior classes have full-day work throughout the week. The double-shift system which was a temporary expedient especially in the rural areas is being gradually dispensed with, as new school buildings are being erected.

Syllabus

The subjects of study and the hours devoted per week are as follows:—

First Year—Spiritual culture (2), reading and arithmetic (3 periods *per day*), gymnastics (3), drawing (1), handicraft (1), singing (1).

Boys and girls read the same course.

Second Year—Almost the same as first year, except that reading, morals and arithmetic receive more attention (4 periods). Sentence-making (composition) is now added as a new feature.

Third Year—Same as before; except that boys have one extra period in handwork every week.

Fourth Year—Sewing is added for girls.

Science is added for all.

Handwork emphasised for boys.

The rest is the same as before.

Fifth Year—Now Geography and Japanese History are added. For boys, *Judo* (Jugitsu or Japanese wrestling) and *Kendo* (sword-fencing) are taught simultaneously with sports. For girls, sewing continues to be emphasised.

Sixth Year—Science is now emphasised; *Judo* and handwork are also specially attended to.

It is necessary to explain what *spiritual culture* is. It is an extensive subject comprising of ethics, civics, politics, and such other topics. But at the elementary stage stress is laid on the cultivation of the following virtues: loyalty to the Emperor, reverence for ancestors patriotism, social service, self-sacrifice to the extent of martyrdom, and above all discipline and obedience. Special text-books are prepared for the subject.

Uniformity of Text Books

As already said, elementary education is under rigid central control and the number of hours given to each subject is uniformly fixed by Government regulations. Even the text-books are edited and published by the Department of Education. Such a uniformity of text-books throughout the country is perhaps rarely found elsewhere. Recently however, special provisions are being made to meet the peculiar needs of a given locality so as to relieve too rigid a conformity to teaching materials.

Generally, one teacher is in charge of the whole class but subject teaching is not altogether unknown. The initial salaries of men and women teachers (who are appointed by local authorities) are 45 Yen * and 38 Yen respectively. They may rise upto 150 Yen by periodical increments to be given on the recommendation of the Head Master. The increments are not regular and may vary from 3 Yen to 10 Yen. A significant feature of the teacher's salary is that the teacher in the elementary school is more highly paid than the teacher in the middle school. Another remarkable feature is that though his salary is not very high, the proportion of his pension to the salary is much higher than that of other Government servants.

As a rule most of the teachers are trained. They are educated approximately up to the middle school standard and have to put in 4 to 5 years in the Normal School. The training of teachers is a special subject which deserves a special treatment.

* 1 Yen = 12 annas (approximately)

The Head-Master

The Head Master of every elementary school is appointed and paid by Central Government. His salary is much higher than those of his Assistants (150—250 Yen). He is in fact the moving spirit of the school and secures a conformity to the policy of the Central Government.

It is the duty of every city, town, or village, to build and maintain one or more elementary schools. But as the expenses of education are a heavy drain on the earnings of the rural community, the Government makes a substantial grant-in-aid. In large cities education absorbs nearly 1/8th of the whole expenditure, but in villages and small towns it takes up nearly half of the budget. The Government, before making grants-in-aid, makes sure of a certain standard in the quality of instruction and qualifications of the staff, in sanitary arrangements and in the use of text-books. Out of the amount spent on education about 60 per cent goes to elementary education.

The elementary schools are regularly inspected at the hands of three different agencies, viz., local authorities, the Prefectural Government and the Central Government. The last-named authority may have only a casual inspection as it exercises a constant supervision through the Head Master.

Buildings and Equipment

The buildings and equipment of elementary schools have recently shown considerable improvement. As to the construction of the buildings, there is a great difference between those in the city and those in the country. The urban schools are usually built of concrete, while those in the country are wooden constructions. Many city schools have, in addition to their regular class-rooms, other large and well-equipped rooms, such as lecture-halls, music-rooms, gymnasiums, and special rooms for the care of those children who are physically weak. There are very few one-room school-houses in Japan. In some schools, there are special libraries for children reading in the Third and later years. There are small museums of handwork also.

In this connection a few matters of detail may be of interest to the reader. In the larger elementary schools, there are installed loud-speakers in each class-room so as to enable the Head Master to give his orders through the microphone from his table. Thus there is no circulation of notices which often causes disturbance in classwork

in our institutions. In the verandahs adjoining the classrooms are provided wash-basins and mirrors so as to enable boys to be neat and tidy before entering the classroom. In some of the smaller schools umbrellas are provided by citizens for the use of children. In certain schools provision is made for emergency treatment.

A word about the seating arrangement of boys and girls in various classes. In the first three classes, they are seated together. In the next two classes, there are alternative arrangements, i. e., in some schools they are seated separately and in some others they sit together; of else, boys may be seated on one side and girls on the other. In the final class, boys and girls are usually included in separate classes. This is partly necessitated by the varying emphasis on different subjects.

New Educational Movements

New educational movements have considerably influenced Japanese educational system. New ideas in methods of teaching have received adequate attention. Methods and theories such as Integrated Instruction, Project Work Method and Self-directed Study, are on the anvil, and are being tried in some schools.

So far we have dealt with ordinary elementary schools. In addition there are higher elementary schools which admit about 60 per cent of those who have completed the ordinary elementary course and which cover two years. The applicants for admission are growing in number as there are many who desire to learn more but cannot proceed to the secondary schools. Completing the elementary school course is by itself not an adequate qualification for admission to secondary schools. As the Principal of an important secondary school explained, the excessive number of applicants for admission "made it necessary to take a very difficult entrance examination." In Tokyo about 5,000 children failed in the entrance examination held last spring. The common expression used for examination hall in Japan is therefore, very aptly, "examination hell."

Higher Elementary Schools

For these reasons the additional or higher elementary course is getting popular (at any rate populous). In fact a well-organised higher elementary school, if intimately related to the industrial conditions of its neighbourhood, serves as an efficient industrial school for

training the young men of the locality. In general, it may be said that the Higher Elementary school course continues the element of liberal education of the preceding course, laying special stress on languages, spiritual culture and morals, Japanese History and Geography. At this stage, one or more out of the following subjects is added with special emphasis: handicraft, agriculture, industry, commerce, and domestic science (for girls only). This course is not compulsory but it is necessary and useful. As the ordinary elementary education is not sufficient to enable the child to play its proper part in social life, the utility of this additional course cannot be overestimated. The salaries of teachers in these schools are slightly lower than those of the ordinary elementary schools. Boys and girls at this stage are always seated separately. Greater emphasis is laid on manual work, and a practical bias is given to the whole course.

The Finished Product

Although it may be conceded that elementary education by itself does not equip the student to face life squarely, it does impart to him qualities which stand him in good stead to participate successfully in the struggle that is to come.

It is no wonder therefore that the pupil, after he has finished his elementary school course is physically well-built, has learnt observation and application, is fairly conversant with Japanese History and Geography, and fully at home in his own language and literature; and what is far more important, he has in him the makings of a loyal subject, a patriotic citizen, a latent ~~businessman~~ and a potential soldier.

